

# SESSION 2004 UPDATE

## 6TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT



### Representative Brad Benson

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Dear Friends,

The 2004 legislative session ended March 11. My priority was to create opportunity—educational opportunities and job opportunities for the citizens of the 6th District. This focus guided my efforts this session.

My newsletter will provide you with information on how we did on these issues as well as important contact information. Remember, I am here to represent your views.

If you have questions or concerns about the issues I am working on, please give me a call, or write to me. I'm always happy to hear from you and welcome your thoughts and ideas.

I'm honored to serve the 6th District. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brad Benson".

Brad Benson  
State Representative

## Continuing to create and retain jobs for Washingtonians

An important set of tax credits and deferrals for employers that generate jobs, particularly in rural areas, was scheduled to expire this year. Some 560 companies are using these tax incentives, and business leaders believe them important for our state to be competitive in attracting high-demand, high-paying jobs.

Measures such as **House Bill 2546** will help in our continuing effort to diversify and strengthen our state's job market. Passage of the high-tech tax incentive measure, was one of the session's early achievements. It renews a set of tax credits associated with research and development or pilot-scale manufacturing in high-technology industries. Hundreds of small high-tech firms have benefited from the tax credits and exemptions, which also are vital for supporting industries designated as "targets" like advanced computing, semiconductors and biotechnology. Without legislative action, the incentives would have expired this year and taxes would have increased.

## Supplemental operating budget

This session we were charged with making minor adjustments to the operating budget passed last year to account for unanticipated costs for things such as

higher than expected increases in school enrollment, flooding or forest fires.

As one of its final actions before adjournment, the Legislature did approve a supplemental budget. The good news is that it required no new taxes and leaves just under \$300 million in reserves—a significant improvement over the original House Democrat budget, which left a reserve balance of less than 1 percent to cover emergencies and unforeseen expenses. The bad news is that it increases spending by \$145 million, leaving the state in a very precarious situation when we begin to build the 2005-2007 biennial budget.

## Supplemental capital budget funds important projects for Spokane

I was very pleased that the capital budget provided funding for a variety of major projects at four-year and two-year institutions in Spokane. It is important to invest in our state's higher education system now, more than ever.

- \$31.6 million in funding for Washington State University's Riverpoint Campus Academic Center
- \$1.8 million for Spokane Falls Community College Business and Social Science project
- \$290,000 for emergency repairs at Spokane Intercollegiate Research and Technology Institute (SIRTI)

- \$3.2 million for Museum of Arts and Culture.

## Improvements made to the WASL

Students graduating beginning with the class of 2008 must pass the WASL, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning. When we began the session students only had one chance to take the test (during the spring of their tenth grade year.) The stakes are high, and failure rates have been alarming.



**House Bill 2195**, which was passed into law, will allow students as many as five chances to pass the 10th grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning. The bill provides up to four retakes and directs the Superintendent of Public Instruction to devise alternatives for students who fail the exam. The legislature also authorized alternative testing for those who don't do well on paper tests. Every student will now know they will be able to graduate once they meet the standard.

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### Providing students and parents educational choices

Parents and students should have a variety of educational options available to them, which is why I supported HB 2295. It will allow five charter schools to be established each of the next three years, with the addition of ten charter schools each year the following three years. It gives the superintendent of public instruction the authority to require a public school which has failed to meet state standards for three consecutive years, to convert to a charter school. This bill is a small step in the right direction. It will give parents more public school choices for their children's education. It may also identify new approaches that will help all our public schools. I look forward to working with teachers, parents and lawmakers next session to identify further opportunities for Washington students.

### Other Important Issues of 2004 Session:

#### No relief from rising insurance rates due to unjust lawsuits

Tort reform took center stage when the session began. Ultimately only a handful of minor bills passed rather than a comprehensive solution. While the bills we passed were good, we missed an opportunity to help stabilize insurance rates and keep doctors in Washington. We all want victims to receive relief from their damages. When litigation affects affordable housing and health care for all Washington citizens, however, it's time to look for alternatives. Real tort reform would bring cases to trial quicker, settlements would be faster, and injured parties would see relief much sooner than through our current slow and expensive system. I'm disappointed that we fell short of mean-

ingful reform this session, but remain hopeful the 105 day session next year will be more productive in making needed reforms.

#### Preserving voters choice – Finding a new state primary system

The Legislature was forced to find a replacement to Washington's blanket primary this session, which has been declared unconstitutional. My priority has been to preserve voters' choice. After much debate, the compromise plan passed by the Legislature—the Top 2 system—would allow voters to pick their favorite candidate for each office regardless of party affiliation. The top two vote-getters (potentially from the same party) would advance to the November ballot. The bill also included a "fallback" provision in case the courts sided with the major parties and threw out the top two system. The Montana-style primary requires a voter to choose a party and vote for only those candidates. The choice is kept confidential.

Although this may not have been a perfect solution, it did come closest to preserving the most desired aspects of our blanket primary—it maintained Washington voters' ability to keep their party affiliation private while ensuring maximum choice.

**UPDATE: On April 1, Gov. Locke vetoed the "Top 2" part of the bill, and the backup Montana Plan was left in place. The choice of parties remains confidential and no party registration will be required. Legal challenges were filed immediately, and the Washington Grange has launched an initiative campaign to overturn Locke's veto.**



### It's easy to stay informed!



Information about legislative issues is as close as your keyboard. There are plenty of ways to get involved and stay informed on issues important to you.

For more information about the issues I'm working on, visit my website at <http://hrc.leg.wa.gov/members/benson.htm>

#### Additional information on the Internet:

**State government:**  
[www.access.wa.gov](http://www.access.wa.gov)

**Legislative information:**  
[www.hrc.leg.wa.gov](http://www.hrc.leg.wa.gov)

#### Other ways to get information and assistance:

I would be happy to speak to your group, organization or school.

#### Topics might include:

- Issues before the Legislature
- How does the legislative process work?
- What it's like to be a legislator
- Issues specific to the 6<sup>th</sup> legislative district

#### Ask for assistance.

Legislators are elected to serve you. If you are facing challenges working with a state agency, contact me to see if I can help.